The Fall of Wisdom:
Reconstruing Theologies of Evil

Chris E.W. Green
cegreen@seu.edu

[1]

Rowan Williams has written a fine essay on what he calls the "antitheology" of Julian of Norwich, which he says unfamiliarizes the familiar in the hopes of pruning back the theological tree, cutting away the dead limbs for the sake of new growth.[1] Obviously I am neither Julian nor the son of Julian, but that is precisely the kind of work I am trying to do in this paper. I do *not* want to be controversial or pointlessly difficult. I *do* want to be helpfully odd.

The paper moves in five parts. First, a dangerously brief sketch of the Christian doctrine of evil. Second, an even more dangerous sketch of Augustine's view. Third, a fuller sketch of Wesley's. These first three sections are brief, but the fourth section is not. In it I propose a reconstrued theology of evil in a series of nine theses. The final section is a "So how now should we live?" conclusion.

One last word of preface. I have selected two lines from Julian's *Revelations* as the center and boundary markers for my reconstrual. "God is the mid-point of all." This is the point at the center of the circle, the *punctus*. "Our Lord God doeth all." This is the circle itself, the boundary. These two claims sum up and ground all that I want to argue for.

[2]

It is always risky, as I said, to summarize the history of Christian doctrine. But as heuristic guides the following claims hold true. In terms of the doctrine of *creation* Christian theologies of evil traditionally have affirmed (1) that God did not—and indeed could not—create evil; (2) that evil, therefore, is a no-thing, (3) a no-thing actualized against God's will—but not necessarily against his purposes— (4) by the bad but free choices of angels and humans. (5) These bad choices effected the Fall and its endlessly disastrous far-reaching consequences, but (6) in spite of the Fall, the created order remains fundamentally good, a good and faithful witness to the goodness and faithfulness of God. (7) The rational creatures, however, angels and humans, are ruined, their natures stripped of goodness. Humans, unlike the angels, are not finally irredeemable. But they are by nature opposed to God and godliness, wounded so profoundly by sin they can do nothing to save themselves or protect others—including the impersonal other—from the destruction they cannot not bring about.

In terms of the doctrine of *providence*, these classic theologies of evil as a rule have affirmed (8) that without in any way doing wrong God in the beginning allowed and in the present continues to allow evil in order to bring about a greater good. In such a construal, (9) God can never be said to do evil any more than he could be said to create it. He is goodness itself, and whatever he does is inherently right. Who he is and what he does are simply identical. But (10) God can be said to do good by doing *evils*, or at least to do good by *using* evils to punish or restrain sin and to press faithless sinners—and sinful believers—toward repentance.

[1] Rowan Williams, *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

Finally, in terms of the doctrine of *salvation* these theologies of evil have affirmed (j) that God will ultimately triumph over evil in all its manifestations, destroying it absolutely, healing every damage done—whether to human beings or to the good creation entrusted to their care.

|2|

Most, perhaps all, of these ideas were articulated long before Augustine heard the child's voice. But it can hardly be denied that he formulated them with new breadth and depth, new focus and verve, combatting Pelagianism on the one hand and Manichaeism on the other. Against the latter he affirms the essential goodness of the created order, and insists that evil neither transcends reality (ultimacy belongs to God alone) nor is it grounded in reality. Instead, evil is the privation of good (*privatio boni*). Not the opposite of good, much less the opposite of God. Evil is groundless and purposeless nonreality.

Against the former, he affirms that human agency is drastically curtailed by the givens of reality, and radically disordered by evil. But these affirmations raise questions. If evil has no will of its own, if it is not spirited, then how does it emerge at all? For his part, Augustine argued that it emerged by virtue of creation's (in themselves good) materiality and mutability. Creation is good but because it is created out of nothing, it lacks ontological perfection. And lacking that perfection, it is not at all flawed but certainly vulnerable. It is contingently, not absolutely, good.[2] Evil, somehow, takes advantage of that opportunity, that contingency.

Another question presents itself. Why would God give a freedom with such a catastrophic vulnerability? Astonishingly, Augustine is ready for the question and has a profound—and in my judgment a profoundly mistaken—response. First, he says a creation that has been redeemed from evil through the incarnation of God is better than a creation that needs no such redemption. Second, in redeeming creation God reveals himself more fully than he could have done otherwise.[3] These answers, of course, suggest that although God did not create evil, and although it emerged in some sense against his will, God had a purpose for evil, and uses it to glorious effect. God's use of evil does not make evil good. But the good God does use evil to make good better.

|3|

John Wesley held, as Augustine did, that Lucifer's sins—first pride, then self-will—are the primal cause of evil. Evil has no cause other than Lucifer's decision.[4] God did not create it. Nature did not require it. So, how did it happen? Inexplicably (but not impossibly) Lucifer tempted himself and fell into sin.

By contrast, Adam's sin, which infects humanity with evil, is not inexplicable. It is not inexplicable because evil did not arise from within him spontaneously, but came to him from without. Evil seduced him, took advantage of him., through the serpent's guile.[5] So, for humans, unlike the angels, evil has always crouched at the door. In Wesley's words, "'God made man upright,' and every creature perfect in its kind." But Adam's perfection was different in degree if not kind from

---

[2] David Fergusson, Creation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 44.
[3] Fergusson, *Creation*, pp. 44-45.
[4] Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*
[5] Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*

Lucifer's, and, under the power of external temptation, Adam turned from his perfection, and "by his apostasy from God, he threw not only himself, but likewise the whole creation, which was intimately connected with him, into disorder, misery, death…"

At times Wesley talks about the origins of evil rather cavalierly, as if the free-will account obviously and conclusively absolves God of any blame for all that has gone wrong with creation. "Upon this ground, I say, we do not find it difficult to justify the ways of God with men." Yes, God allowed Adam to sin. And yes, God allowed evil to emerge in Lucifer. And yes, God allow that evil and that sin knowing what they would do to his creation. But God also knew what would come—or, better, what he would make to come—from this tragedy: "when we consider [that] all the evils introduced into the creation may work together for our good, yea, may 'work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,' we may well praise God for permitting these temporary evils, in order to [bring about] our eternal good…" For Wesley, God is to be praised not only for the good but also for the evils through which greater good is brought about.

Wesley could make such a claim because he stood convinced that God often if not always blesses in sufferings and through sufferings and that if there had been no suffering, then much good, even the highest good, would have had no place in creaturely life. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this truth for Wesley. In his own words, it is "the ground of resignation to God." As he sees it, only in believing that suffering works good for us can we endure whatever comes. It does good for us and it does good for God. He is pleased for us to "own him in the face of danger: in defiance of sorrow, sickness, pain, or death." For Wesley, as for Seneca, there is no more glorious spectacle, no sight more worthy of God, than a human being in a fight against adversity. Job in many ways is the saint par excellence. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" is the faith's most mature confession. It comes closest to Christ's "Nevertheless, not my will …"

According to Wesley's theodicy, without evil—natural, moral, penal—there would have been no moral or natural development, no ethical virtue or physical strength. Patience, meekness, and gentleness, faith, hope, and love mature only in resisting or undergoing adversity. And happiness depends on being virtuous. Therefore, in Wesley's calculus, happiness is only possible on the far side of the struggle against evil. In other words, without evil there simply would be no way to become truly good as Christ is good, and there would be no way to do good to others: mercy, charity, compassion, forgiveness would be impossible. Even more importantly for Wesley, without evil there would be no sharing in the life of God. "The fall of Adam produced the death of Christ." Wesley is happy to sing the felix culpa.

Satan is the source and cause of evil, but Wesley insists that God remains in control. God sovereignly allows evil and uses evils, bringing them to the faithful (for testing or formation) and against the unfaithful (for correction or punishment). This comes clear, for example, in Charles' earthquake hymns—as well as his sermon on the cause and cure of earthquakes, which is included in Wesley's collected sermons.

The pillars of the earth are thine,
And thou hast set the world thereon;
They at thy sovereign word incline,
The center trembles at thy frown,

The everlasting mountains bow,
And God is in the earthquake now

John, like his brother, insists that God allowed and allows both evil and evils because of the good and goods that he can bring about through them. And in his sermon on providence, he offers yet another reason for evil's continued presence: "God cannot counteract himself, or oppose his own work. Were it not for this, he would destroy all sin, with its attendant pain in a moment." For the sake of his own wisdom and human freedom, and for the sake of his and their collaborative work in sanctification, God waits to end evil.

Wesley's doctrine of natural law is not especially coherent, at least not as I read it. His arguments against slavery seem to depend on an overly optimistic natural law as understood through his personal experiences, but of course those very same kinds of appeal were being used more often in *support* of slavery. Why does he not notice the moral and philosophical problems raised by his arguments? As one 19th century critic pointed out, Wesley seemed to know a lot about what Edenic creation must have been like—no volcanoes, no earthquakes, no deserts, no sea, breezes but no windstorms, rain but no rainstorms, rivers but no floods, no predators or predation; in short, no violence of any kind—but had not taken seriously at all the scientific accounts of the world's history, accounts which show that there has always been violence and death. He had read his Scripture, to be sure. And his Milton. But not Darwin. Be that as it may, Wesley's primary concern in his theology of natural law seems to have been to affirm the idea of providential particularity. For him, God's governance was not the invariable enforcement of already-established laws. God lives with his creation. That is why providence is even more particular for those who live closest to God. To be sure, God governs the planets, the weather, the lives of the beasts—sparrows and worms and oxen and lions. But special attention is given to human beings, and in particular to Christians. The most special attention of all is given to the most devout. They are the ones of whom it is said "The very hairs of your head are numbered."

|4|

As I see it, Wesley's account of evil has much to commend it. He is on most points traditionally Augustinian, even Reformed. But when he disagrees with the tradition, I generally agree more with him than I do with it. Still, his view, or at least parts of it, leaves me unsettled, dissatisfied. I do not think we can justify the ways of God to man. I do not think we can justify *our* ways to man. In the latter case, we end up justifying ourselves. In the former, we end up justifying evil. This, I think, is the Achilles heel of all, and not just Wesleyan, theodicies.

We can't say nothing, however. And we can't only offer criticisms and I-don't-like-that's. We're responsible to talk about the faith we've received as intelligibly as we can, and we can't speak intelligibly about what it means for God to be good and to share his goodness with us if we say nothing about evil. So, we say what we can, hoping it is not entirely misleading and not too harmful. Bearing all that in mind, what follows is my attempt to construct an anti-theodical antitheology of evil that emphasizes the goodness of God. It does not differ with Wesley or the Augustinian tradition on most points. I agree that God did not create evil, and that evil is nothing, and that God will finally triumph over it. But I do want to argue against the grain of that tradition, at least as I understand it, that evil has no justification, that nature is and has been from the beginning radically corrupt, that God has no use for evil and is always only opposed to it, and that

the Christian calling is above all a calling to take God's place in resisting evil and doing all that can be done to end evils.

Thesis #1: We cannot speak of evil.

We can only speak of good things and then negate what we have said. Actually, that is not quite right either. It is sometimes said that God is mysterious and evil is absurd. But I am convinced that we cannot say that now, at least not without immediate qualifications. Etymologically, "absurd" refers to the out-of-tune, the discordant. But discordance is not necessarily unbeautiful. And in day-today speech, we speak about the absurd as the crazy, the meaningless. But meaninglessness is not meaningless. Read any Cormac McCarthy novel. Or read about the holy fools in the Russian tradition.

It is closer to the truth, I think, to say that evil is neither a mystery nor an absurdity. I believe it is closer to the truth to say that evil is what mystery or absurdity would be if they were stripped of all of their goodness. And we have no way of knowing what that would be. Well, it wouldn't be anything. Evil is unknowable in and of itself, because there is nothing to it. It has no in-and-of because it has no self. We can know the violation, the wounding of the good, however. We can know good as it is somehow made less than it could and should be. The only way to know evil is to know what should be but isn't and to know what is but shouldn't be. That knowing awakens the desire out of which creaturely truth and beauty and goodness come.

Thesis #2: Evil asserts itself right from the beginning of everything.

We cannot speak of evil, but evil must be spoken about. What should we do? As I said, we have to look to the good and see where it is diminished, disobedient to itself. And so we should begin with the first creature: wisdom. "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth…" (Prov. 8.22-24).

God creates, but God creates by collaboration with wisdom, the "master worker," the creating creature, the first and determinative reality for all other creatures. Because of wisdom, all things have their own genius, their nature. Tigers have a wisdom that makes them tigers and not cheetahs. And cheetahs have a wisdom that makes them cheetahs and not termites, although of course each tiger, each cheetah, lives that wisdom uniquely. Non-living things have their wisdom, too. Everything in existence, and even existence itself.

But here is the trouble: wisdom itself, the first of God's creatures, the creature through which all other creatures are made, is fallen. And if it had not fallen, nothing and no one would have fallen. Wisdom is not evil, of course, but it is marred by evil, corrupted and fractured. Therefore, all things are necessarily undone, diseased at their very heart, "something imperfect and malformed lodged in the heart of being."[6]

In her *Construing the Cross,* Frances Young argues that the serpent in the garden represents wisdom, fallen wisdom, the wisdom of the world, the wisdom the gnostics sought and that Jesus's

[6] Cormac McCarthy*, All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 71.

death exposes as folly. Christ, she argues, is the new serpent who counters the wisdom of the serpent by being lifted up on the cross.[7] She concludes that this account explains the "ambiguity of the human condition" more adequately than does Augustine's "catastrophic" fall.[8] But I would argue the fall of wisdom is *more* catastrophic than the tradition has readily acknowledged, and precisely because it makes all things ambiguous, impenetrable. The sign of the Fall is not darkness as false light, a light that is darkness.

Proverbs, as we all known, celebrates wisdom. As does the book of James. But it is critical that we pay close attention to the narrative of Scripture. Wisdom literature is encompassed by a story that leads from Proverbs to Job and Ecclesiastes. Solomon, "the wisest man who ever lived," the character who asked for and was given wisdom by God, makes an absolute wreck of his life (and the lives of others). He does this not in spite of his wisdom, but because of it. He sees the way of things, knows deeply the nature of the world, and it is that very seeing, that very knowledge, which leads him inevitably to despair. "Those who gain knowledge learn sorrow." The more you know the less it matters. The better you are the worse your sins. The most powerful are the least effective. "All is vanity."

The wisdom prized by Proverbs is useful, no doubt, but it is ultimately misleading. This is most obvious when it presumes to start with the givenness of experience and work back by inference to divine purpose. My youngest son, Emery, said to me just today, "God did not make me to laugh because when I laugh it does not sound like a laugh." He is assuming, as all natural theologians must, that whatever he does that he cannot explain or control must therefore be the work of God. But that, I am arguing, is the work of *wisdom*—and wisdom is fallen from the start. This is why James warns that natural wisdom, wisdom that emerges from "within," and not "from above," from beyond the creaturely, is twisted, "devilish."

What God made is good, to be sure. That is to be affirmed in no uncertain terms. But evil somehow impossibly emerged right at the first with and within all things, as the fraying of every thread in the fabric. Theologically speaking, creation "in the beginning," that is, as it is in God, is essentially and entirely good. Historically and philosophically speaking, the world as it is in itself is always already fallen from its beginning. This is a Johannine theme. All things are created in the Word who is in the beginning with God as God. But Satan is a liar *from the beginning*. And the Word is slain *from the foundations of the world*. In Julian's phrasing, when Adam fell, the Son of God fell.

Thesis #3: Evil does not emerge from a choice but as context-determining reality for all choices.

Talking about the fall of wisdom allows us to see more clearly what I have already said: evil arises (not by its own will, not by God's will, and not by created wills, but impossibly by no will at all) to condition the reality in which angels and humans have choice. Evil is present at the roots of the roots of creation. Where good abounds, there evil much more abounds. And has always abounded.

For whatever reason, we often imagine freedom as uninfluencedness, as the opportunity to choose either good or evil without pressure from God. In this way, we posit evil as the corollary to good

[7] Frances Young, *Construing the Cross*, pp. 87-95.
[8] Young, *Construing the Cross*, p. 97.

and we suggest that freedom comes only in independence from God. Without these suppositions, we think, decisions simply make no sense. And without decisions, the entire spirituality is in question. Or so we think. But the truth is, as Augustine knew, evil cannot be chosen. And the good can be chosen only in the sense that it can be tasted, approved. The good enraptures—although that enrapturement is only rarely experienced as rapture. A faithful Wesleyan spirituality is not about decisions even if it is about transfigurations.

This makes the most sense if we think about it Christologically. Jesus reveals the complete enrapturement of humanity to God. "Not my will but thine be done." And he reveals that that complete enrapturement just simply is freedom. Christ does not choose between good and evil. He in and of himself is delight in the good, a delighting that sees the good as perfectly transparent to its ground. A delighting that sees the fullness of good in full light, sees the good without the shadow of evil falling over it or cast by it. As Maximus the Confessor explains, Christ is not free in that he can deliberate between good and evil and decide for one or the other. Christ is free in that he does not need to deliberate. Christ is bound to the good, which is to say that he is not bound to nature. That's what we mean when we say he is free. Freedom is not uninfluencedness and undirectedness. Freedom, for creatures, is absolute influencedness and absolute directedness. If this were not true, obedience would be violent. We are free in obedience, not from it. This, as I see it, is the heart of Wesleyan doctrines of holiness.

Thesis #4: Because of what evil does to wisdom and wisdom does to nature, nature cannot be trusted as an authoritative witness to God's will.

Christian thinkers and practitioners often appeal to nature, to the-way-of-things, as evidence of what God is like and what God wants. In his sermons on 1 Corinthians 11, Chrysostom is explicit: "When I say Nature I mean God." Appeal is also often made to what is taken to have been the nature of things before the Fall (as for example Wesley did in Sermon 56). But the-way-of-things is not right—and it has never been right. Nature is not a reliable narrator of God's works, and was never reliable. Nature is, as it was created to be, a principality, a power. But now, because of wisdom's fall, nature is in the language of Ephesians and Colossians a principality—*the* principality—standing over against Christ in dis-allegiance.

Seeing God, Isaiah hears the seraphs singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The Apocalypse takes up Isaiah's song, but makes a significant change to it: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." What in Isaiah is a statement about creation, about history, about nature, is in Revelation a statement about God, eternity, grace. What does this change mean? Obviously, a number of readings are possible but it seems to me that in context the Apocalypse's song is an interpretation, or re-interpretation, of Isaiah's song. God is the one who was, is, and is to come the whole earth will in the end be filled with the divine glory. It would also work, I'm convinced, to take John's song as a defiant critique of an "overrealized eschatology." Is the whole earth full of God's glory? No! The earth is altogether devoid of God's glory. But God remains God, and so there is hope.

The Gospels suggest that evil manifests in two forms: the satanic and the demonic. The demons in the Gospels are everywhere the cause of miseries and calamities. The demonic is the manifestation of evil as darkness and chaos, destruction and death. But Satan, by contrast, is in the Gospels the

source of deception. So, the satanic is the manifestation of evil as (false) light and (false) order, (false) advancement and (false) affirmation. The demonic is unnatural. The satanic is, or at least appears to be, natural. The demonic is mad. The satanic is, or at least appears to be, wise.

In this light, then, we see how important it is that there is so little talk of the demonic in the passion narratives. There is only one mention of the satanic. (Satan enters into Judas and then Judas confers with the authorities about betraying Jesus.) Everything that happened to Jesus on Good Friday was natural. His condemnation and death were not the work of demons or "unclean spirits." They were the work of human beings doing only what seemed necessary to ordinary people at the time. I imagine everyone in Jerusalem saying, in one way or another, "It's too bad, really. I'm no fan of Pilate or Caiaphas, as you know, but at the end of the day they did what had to be done." Or "It's not right. It's not right. But he did push it too far. What are you going to do?"

Naïve readings of the Gospels leave us with the impression that Jesus's trial was an obvious sham and his death an even more obvious tragedy. As if everyone were acting in bad faith. Or, more truthfully, as if they all were out of their minds and possessed with evil spirits. (This is precisely the kind of impression Gibson creates in his Passion of the Christ.) But on closer readings, the Gospels tell another, more surprising and more troubling story. Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution—remember, those are the terms wisdom wants us to use—happened very naturally. Petty jealousy. Simple crowd dynamics. Fear of the police. Religious fervor. Political savvy. Common cruelty. Stupidity. Cowardice. And, most of all, confusion and uncertainty.

It is not without reason that no one protested on Jesus' behalf. Not everyone cried "Crucify him!" But no one cried "Do not crucify him." Judas was paid to betray him, but no one tried to buy his release. Joseph of Arimathea did not agree to Jesus's condemnation, but he also did not do anything to save Jesus. He was resigned to Jesus' fate even as he was prepared to do what needed to be done once Jesus was dead. If Solomon had been in Pilate's place, what do you think he would have done? No king, no governor would have done right by Jesus. St. Paul says that if the gods of this world—the Pilates and Herods and Caiaphases and the principalities that overruled them—had known what they were doing, they would not have crucified Jesus. But of course by the canons of this world's wisdom they *did* know what they were doing. That is precisely why they crucified him.

Stanley Hauerwas is fond of quoting a line from John Howard Yoder: "those who carry their crosses are working with the grain of the universe." But that seems like a grave mistake to me (pun intended). Those who carry their crosses are working against the grain of the universe for the universe's sake. Otherwise, why would there be a cross? The cross is folly. The cross is transgression. The cross is unnatural. It is true, as Jenson says, that Jesus is not a novelty, not a foreign object in this world. Grace does not destroy nature. But grace does expose nature's pretensions. Grace re-nature nature by calling it to change, to humility, and to reparation of its wrongs. What Jesus said and did with the storm and the fig tree and the water is an indication of what is true about our nature and the fallen wisdom at its essence. Jesus is not a foreigner, but as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we never recognize him without a miracle—the same miracle that takes him away from our eyes immediately.

Thesis #5: The cross is unnatural, and the cross judges everything; so, we need to radically rework our natural theologies and all the doctrines and practices rooted in our natural theologies.

Our ethics and our aesthetics, our political theologies and theologies of sexuality and gender, our practices of mission and discipleship, as well as our philosophies of meaning and beauty, are rooted at least partially in affirmations drawn from natural theologies. That is, they are rooted in wisdom traditions funded by personal and communal experience. We need to critique these traditions, including the wisdom we've received on sexuality. Not dismiss it. Not despise it. But critique it in light of the Gospel, the Scriptures, the Christian tradition, the sciences, as well as other theological and philosophical traditions.[9]

We need to challenge the notion of "creatorial design." We should do so, first, because for reasons I have already laid out, we are incapable of working back from the way things are to the way things must have been "intended" to be. As if God has intentions! Whatever we have been led to believe, Scripture does not describe a sinless beginning of cosmic or human history. Not even in mythic terms. Scripture instead right from the beginning reveals the *fracturedness* of human reality, a fracturedness that issues in evil rather than from it. Remember, the Genesis creation narrative tells us that all is good in creation and then in the next breath speaks of a *forbidden tree,* the knowledge of good *and evil*, a *tempting serpent*, and a *bad desire* in Eve, a readiness in her heart to transgress. And it does not all fall on the serpent and the woman. Adam fails his partner before she eats the fruit from the tree, then shamelessly disavows her a moment later. Even in Eden, marriage, like everything else, was anything but Edenic. And we live far east of Eden now. We should do so, second, because Christ, and not nature, is the revelation.

Appeals to design are often underscored by proof-texting a passage from Matthew's Gospel. Asked about the rules for divorce, Jesus answers by saying that "at the beginning God made them male and female" and "what God has joined, let no one separate." Only later, Jesus says, and only because of Israel's hardness of heart, did God allow Moses to grant the right of divorce to Israelite men. But this prooftext does not actually support the idea of an authoritative "original design." First, Jesus is appealing to a text in the course of a textual argument. He is not making a pronouncement, he is contradicting a reading. "Have you not read…" Second, as the disciples recognize, Jesus's "answer" is impossibly difficult. "It would be better not to marry, then," they say. And Jesus does not disagree. "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given." He refers, in other words, to a wisdom "not of this world," a wisdom not already fully present in the design of the natural order. He refers to a "foolishness" that runs against the grain of the universe. The two stories that follow Jesus' teaching underscore this point. Jesus blesses the little children whom the disciples try to keep away from him and the Rich Young Ruler walks away from Jesus' invitation. The disciples are, again, incredulous. The way Jesus engages children makes no sense. His teachings on wealth make even less sense. Jesus responds with two sayings that give definition to what he has said: "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." And "Many who are first shall be last, and the last first." If our theology of sex does not know what these sayings mean, then it cannot claim to be a *Christian* theology of sex.

---

[9] My version of Coakley's *theologie totale.*

Much more could be said, but let me turn to a critique of our aesthetics, or, more to the point, to the bad natural theologies that ground our understandings of beauty. As you must have noticed, we like to quote Dostoevsky's line, "beauty will save the world," without much thought about what he might be saying much less what it might mean theologically to make such a claim. Even popes have used it without much thought. Pope John Paul II quoted the line in his Letter to Artists, under the heading "The Saving Power of Beauty":

> People of today and tomorrow need this wonder if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us. Thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity, every time it loses its way, will be able to lift itself up and set out again on the right path. In this sense it has been said with profound insight that "beauty will save the world.'

Forget for a moment what might be meant by "beauty." In what sense do Christians expect the world to be saved? And by what means, if any?

I take Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to be a post-Christian apocalypticism. It knows better than to expect salvation for the world, but it sees the world's end as beautiful nonetheless. Or, better, it sees the world's unbeautiful end beautifully. *The Road* ends with these lines:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

This is an anti-eschatology. And it shows that even an anti-eschatology can be beautiful. This is not a beauty that will save the world, however. This is a beauty for a world that cannot be saved. It is a beauty *for* such a world precisely because it grasps the beauty *of* such a world. Theologically, what is significant is the realization that death, including the death of the cosmos, is neither beautiful nor good. But it can be told and sung and seen and heard beautifully nonetheless.

"Beauty will save the world." Prince Mishkin does not actually say that it will. He is asked if he has said it—and he doesn't answer. The idea is immediately dismissed as the "playful" thoughts of a boy in love. In any case, Mishkin is thinking about a woman's beauty, a woman he first saw in a portrait.

> He longed to solve the mystery of something in the face of Nastasia Philipovna, something which had struck him as he looked at the portrait for the first time; the impression had not left him. It was partly the fact of her marvelous beauty that struck him, and partly something else. There was a suggestion of immense pride and disdain in the face almost of hatred, and at the same time something confiding and very full of simplicity. The contrast aroused a deep sympathy in his heart as he looked at the lovely face. The blinding loveliness of it was almost intolerable, this pale thin face with its flaming eyes; it was a strange beauty.

A moment later, a Mrs. Epanchin, one of his distant relatives, takes the portrait from Mishkin and considers it.

> Mrs. Epanchin examined the portrait of Nastasia Philipovna for some little while, holding it critically at arm's length. "Yes, she is pretty," she said at last, "even very pretty. I have seen her twice, but only at a distance. So you admire this kind of beauty, do you?' she asked the prince, suddenly. "Yes, I do—this kind." "Do you mean especially this kind?' "Yes, especially this kind." "Why?" "There is much suffering in this face," murmured the prince, more as though talking to himself than answering the question.

Then, two sisters, one of whom later falls in love with Mishkin, take the portrait.

> "What a power!" cried Adelaida suddenly, as she earnestly examined the portrait over her sister's shoulder. "Whom? What power?" asked her mother, crossly. "Such beauty is real power," said Adelaida. "With such beauty as that one might overthrow the world." She returned to her easel thoughtfully. Aglaya merely glanced at the portrait—frowned, and put out her underlip; then went and sat down on the sofa with folded hands.

Adelaida turns out to be right. But even if we were to side with what we're told Mishkin said, it is clear that he was not talking about beauty-in-general or all things beautiful. He means the beauty of a particular woman, *her* beauty, the beauty of *her face*, a face beautiful because it is strange, sad, hateful, inscrutable. Her beauty is extraordinary because of its power to arouse deep sympathy, and to inflict deep pain. Mishkin's (and Dostoevsky's) is an aesthetics of tragedy.

Over against naïve and instrumentalist understandings of beauty, evidenced in uncritical readings of this famous line, I want to argue that we need always to be thinking about beauty in *conflicted* terms. There is divine beauty and there is creaturely beauty, and they are not only not identical they are definitively *non*-identical, even though the latter was intended to bear the former and will finally bear it once it is transfigured by the end.

The divine beauty is the beauty of the how-much-more, the beauty of excess. So, a gospelized aesthetics emphasizes the disproportion of the infinite. Let me try to explain what I have in mind. Think of two intersecting lines, each running through the middle of the other. The horizontal line is the historical line, the line of nature, the line of the-way-of-things, the line drawn by wisdom. The vertical line is the eschatological line, the line of grace, the line of the-way-things-shall-be, the line drawn by the wisdom of God.

These lines stand for two sets of "transcendentals" reconciled only at a single point. That point, that center, is what the New Testament calls the "appearing" of Christ, the eschaton, the *visio dei*. What does that mean for us? It means we can and should speak truth, do good, and make beauty. But we cannot speak truth, do good, or make *God's* beauty. Only Christ can do that. Our speaking and doing and making always falls on only the horizontal line apart from the intersecting point. "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus told us. But of course he is the God who creates out of nothing, so our nothing isn't necessarily wasted.

The belief in the univocity of beauty troubles our aesthetics. Take, for example, our assumption, held more or less uncritically, that beauty's power always works and when it works, works only for good. The truth is, beauty, beauty as we know it, is *not* necessarily good or for us. In Wesleyan terms, beauty is not sanctifying. If it were, then believers who worship in gothic cathedrals would always be holier than believers who worship in storefronts. But no one is holier because their liturgy or their theology or their architecture is beautiful.[10] In fact, and this is what should unsettle us, we might be left *un*holier.

George Steiner in an interview with Literal magazine was asked about the relation of culture and evil, and this was his response:

> *Steiner*: There are those who are certain that the cultivation of the sensibility of beauty, of humanity, of seriousness in art, in literature, in music and painting, would be some kind of help, some kind of barrier, against inhumanity. But it's all over our world: inhumanity can be combined with high aesthetic experience."
>
> *Interviewer*: "So the humanities don't necessarily humanize, civilization doesn't necessarily civilize —"
>
> *Steiner*: "It may indeed barbarize."

Perhaps reform begins precisely in the moment that we realize it is what we are doing well, and what we are doing right, that is most dangerous for us and others. Perhaps it is the beauty we are making that needs to be unmade.

It has become fashionable to think of the work of discipleship primarily in terms of leading people into virtue-forming practices. But this is problematic because it is not suspicious enough of wisdom and nature. It is a Proverbs Christianity. A Christianity that assumes that the facility that comes with deep knowledge of the nature of things gives us the power to make what we do and think graceful.

In one of his sermons, Luther draws distinctions between false and true meditations on the passion, and I think they have much to teach us about discipleship. What matters, he says, is not that one meditates on Christ's passion but how. It is false if it leads to superstition. But it is true if the believer looks upon Christ in order to see herself and her neighbors rightly. Because Christ suffered for everyone, Christ's sufferings make all of us alike. Therefore, our meditation on those sufferings should reveal to us that likeness. "Where one thorn has pierced Christ, more than a thousand thorns should pierce you."

---

[10] Not that church architecture doesn't matter or makes no difference. Burdened with the task of speaking the gospel as we are, our worship spaces should speak as clearly as possible to the provisionality of what we are doing, to our mortality, and to the unfinishedness of our sanctification. Jenson: "The otherness of the God of the gospel means that the space used to worship him, the space of the moment of decision and action, is not complete in itself and must not appear to be. Its forms should, therefore, be broken, restless, even nervous. The Renaissance ideal of harmony, of the creation of a space that allows us to rest content in the given moment, is here what must be overcome. We should not find a church soothing. The forms of church buildings should be ready to fall [think tent], or take wing [think cathedral]. The should have the dynamics of the temporary."

But the "how" must be given to us, Luther says. We can't work it up. Only the Spirit can sink Christ's sufferings into our hearts. And so we do the practices, but we do them unpretentiously and unpresumptuously, with a sense of irony and a delight in the wildness of this reality God has made. It is important in a tradition that emphasizes seeking God to know that God is found by those who seek him not.

> Since such a work is not in our hands, it happens that sometimes we pray and do not receive it at the time; in spite of this one should not despair nor cease to pray. At times it comes when we are not praying for it, as God knows and wills; for it will be free and unbound: then man is distressed in conscience and is wickedly displeased with his own life, and it may easily happen that he does not know that Christ's Passion is working this very thing in him, of which perhaps he was not aware, just like the others so exclusively meditated on Christ's Passion that in their knowledge of self they could not extricate themselves out of that state of meditation. Among the first the sufferings of Christ are quite and true, among the others a show and false, and according to its nature God often turns the leaf, so that those who do not meditate on the Passion, really do meditate on it; and those who hear the mass, do not hear it; and those who do not hear it, do.

Luther, I contend, is thinking about discipleship in the light of grace as well as nature. He knows, as we should know, that grace does not need nature to work. The Wesleyan "means of grace" are not means in the sense that grace is channeled through them. We pray the Our Father or meditate on Christ's sufferings or listen to a sermon knowing that grace is not dependent on those practices. God is a living God! We do them because we know we are dependent on God and we want to put ourselves in positions where that dependence is articulated. This is most obvious, perhaps, at the Eucharist. Christ does not need to bread and wine to give himself to us. But if we give bread and wine to the Father in thanksgiving for them and for Christ, the Father's gift to us, the Spirit makes them Christ's body and blood for us so that we can share sacramentally in his life, the humanizing life of God, for the sake of the world.

Thesis #6: God is not opposed to nature, but God is opposed to evil always and entirely in all of its manifestations.

The tradition has always insisted that God is not in any sense evil and does not create evil or do evil of any kind. But we need to say more. We need to say that God does not *use* evil, neither to check or erase evil, nor to bring about good from it. And God does not *redeem* evil. God redeems the evildoers who have been sold as slaves to evil. This may at first seem like a difficult, even impossible, case to make. So many in the Augustinian tradition, as well as in the holiness traditions, have been taught to assume that God uses the evils (like prolonged illnesses, catastrophes, disasters) of evil to test and form character. Scripture itself seems to speak in these terms. Take, for example, one of Wesley's favorite passages: "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Paul *cannot* mean in any simple sense that suffering produces endurance. Obviously, many, many people suffer terribly and are not made more patient by it. Many others appear to be patient who have suffered relatively little. All that notwithstanding, the critical point is that God, the living God, creates out of nothing, and so does not need evil—or even good—to make good possible. Patience is the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of painful experience. And painful experiences, as such, have no fruit. Effects, to be sure. Consequences, yes. But no fruit.

Suffering, then, does not yield patience. Suffering yields *to* patience. Think of a man who as boy was physically and verbally abused by his father. Now, long after the father is dead and the boy has grown into a man, he is beginning a ministry to abused children in his city. We might be tempted to say God allowed the abuse in the first place because God intended to use it for good later. And we might be tempted to say that this man is able to minister to abused children now just because he himself survived abuse. But neither is true, at least as far as I can see. God did not allow the abuse, not in the sense that God could have intervened and chose not to. Not in the sense that God "stepped back" and let it happen because he could foresee its usefulness. "Stepping back" is impossible for God. That would be the shadow of turning. We need to know and to say that God is against the abuse absolutely, eternally. And that God is for that boy, and for all of us, absolutely, eternally. God is the one who was, is, and is to come. Therefore, the divine work always comes to us as an eternity, an encompassing reality affecting our past and our future as well as our present. What is happening, then, as this man begins his ministry is not God using his past experiences for good. God is overcoming abuse, including the abuse he suffered, with and through him. The man is collaborating with God and his own younger self in the destruction of the evil that he had to endure.

But does God not use the evil of the cross to save us? One might argue that at the moment of sin's triumph God uses sin against itself and in this way destroys it once-for-all. But the cross is not a use of evil. It is the absolute refusal of the use of evil. Maximus Confessor says that those who know the cross and the empty tomb know the reason for all things. They know why God made the world. But perhaps it is better to say that those who know the cross and the empty tomb know that the unreasonableness of all things does not have the final word. The cross, then, is not the revelation that evil is in fact quite useful after all. The cross is the revelation that God needs nothing to overcome evil and that he will not collaborate with evil in order to overcome evil. He does not even engage evil it. That would not be possible, anyway. He overcomes evil by enfolding the creation within himself, drawing it to fulness by giving it his own fulness. This is the intuition that lies behind Wesley's doctrine of perfection.

Saying evil in all of its forms is useless is not to say suffering plays no part in the Christian life. Nor is it to say God never wills us to go through sufferings. If I am reading St Paul's letter to the Romans rightly, the Christian life is essentially a suffering, an agony. Suffering is not a part, but the whole, of what it means to live in the Spirit, as it comes voluntarily and involuntarily, to soul and body. I see two kinds of suffering, broadly speaking, and three reasons for suffering them Christianly. I want to distinguish natural suffering, brought on by the world simply being what it is, a world of disease and calamity and death, from unnatural, demonic suffering. The second kind is the first kind taken to such an intensity that the dignity of the sufferer, and the dignity of those who are caring for the sufferer, is threatened.

A long, and darkly beautiful, spiritual tradition regards suffering as a way of drawing near to God, a way of identifying with Christ in his passion. As familiar and beautiful as it is, this belief is misguided, I'm convinced. We do not need to suffer to come close to God any more than the Son needed to suffer to come close to the Father. He suffered to come close to us. A narrower, even darker, tradition (as seen in the Carmelites, for example, and Simone Weil) holds that it is through embraced suffering that evil is driven out of the world. We suffer to take the place of Christ among others who are suffering and caring for those who are suffering, bringing grace to bear in their lives within the nature of things, in the midst of the ordinary goings-on of life together, against the grain of the wisdom, the common sense, that dictates and makes intelligible those goings-on. This, it seems to me, is near the truth.

In Ron Hanson's lovely, disturbing novel, The Ecstasy of Mariette, a young nun-to-be is stigmatized. She bleeds from five wounds, from tears in her side, her hands, her feet. And she takes it as a gift: "Look what Jesus has done to me." These wounds are, for her, precious, even, in some mysterious sense, sexually fulfilling. Mariette believes Jesus has given her his wounds so she might know him better. But the novel is less about what the wounds mean for Mariette and more about what they mean for her sisters, her father, and the community. Her wounds are a grace, or are at least graced, but not to make her holier. She is wounded to sanctify those around her, some of whom wonder if she might be a saint and others who are absolutely certain she is a devil.

What makes the novel most remarkable is how careful it is not to say too much about Mariette's wounds. As one reviewer put it,

> Ron Hansen's novel makes no attempt to explain Mariette's experiences; there is no sense in which the author stands above and outside his protagonist's life, ready to share a knowing look with his reader about this sadly deluded girl. The story is open-ended, allowing the reader to interpret Mariette's experience in any number of ways. That is exactly what happens in the convent, where almost every possible reaction, from adoration to loathing and fear, is evoked by Mariette's stigmata.

This, it seems to me, is what truth, and truly graceful people, do.

Perhaps it sounds like I'm suggesting that suffering is, after all, useful for God. I do not mean that. God does not need natural suffering, much less unnatural suffering, to save us. God wills us to go through suffering because that is where we will find those most in need of mercy and justice. And, even more, God wills suffering to go through us because that is the way in which God transforms suffering into what it could not otherwise be. Suffering does not make saints. Saints make suffering into witness—witness against the evil that causes suffering and to the God who is eternally and absolutely opposed to evil. Grace re-natures nature, stripping away the unnatural from it.

Thesis #7: Eschatologically, God ends evil in such a way that all created realities, including historical experiences, are transfigured.

The obvious question is, if God is opposed to and actively resisting all evils always, then why and how do they happen? God does not allow them because he needs them. Or because we do. God does not allow them because God wants to save us from them. God does not allow them at all.

God has always been against evil because God and his work are one, and God does not change. He does not resist evil here and there, time to time. But because we are timed and spaced, and because God is not a factor in what happens in time and space, we cannot experience God's overcoming of evil. Simone Weil says somewhere that when we either do not believe in an infinite mercy behind the curtain of the world or do believe the mercy is in front of the curtain, we become cruel. I have found that what people believe has almost nothing to do with how they treat other people for good or ill. But what Weil says is true in this sense: it is cruel to imagine that divine mercy is "in front of the curtain," that is, is perceptible, identifiable. We will only experience God's destruction of evil in the eschaton that proves to be our beginning. That is, we will only know what God has done to evil when we know him as he has always known, knows, and forever will know us. And that means we will know what has happened in our lives only once we have seen God face-to-face. This is why Revelation says we must be given a new name.

The question remains: if God is against evil, always and absolutely, and if God is not passively allowing it, waiting to the side while history plays out on its own terms, then why is evil not ended? The answer, or at least what seems to me like the beginning of an answer, arises from the relation of the creation to God and the character of God's activity in and on creation. Strictly speaking, God has no relation to creation although creation has a relation to him. And that is why he is not a factor in creaturely existence, not one cause, not even the greatest cause, among other causes. If we were to add up all of history's occurrences, we could not then divvy events into tow piles: one for the works of God and another for the works of creatures. God's works as like God: infinite, so we simply cannot take them in. We walk by faith and not by sight because God's works are too bright, or too dark, too see.

If God were one cause among many, God's works would be vulnerable to unforeseen consequences. And therefore God's works would be violent. But God is sovereign, which is to say God is the reality-beyond-reality whose works establish and direct and fulfill all things. As Bulgakov says, God creates. God does not cause. As a matter of dogma, of course, we confess that Christ was conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and that he was raised from the dead by that same Spirit. But even these are not *caused* events. They are *created and creative* events. That is, they are events that have no causation, no causing factors. They simple are, and therefore determine everything that is.

Eschatologically, then, God ends evil. And not only ends it, but ends it in such a way that history itself is transformed. Aquinas asks if God can make the past not to have been, and answers that God cannot do that because it implies a contradiction. But he does suggest that God can change what the past has done to someone. He gives a somewhat awkward example: a corrupted woman cannot be made not to have lost her virginity. But she can be freed of corruption. Her dignity and purity can be restored even if her virginity cannot. But that is true now. Aquinas is not allowing for what the eschaton will mean for this woman.

The eschaton is not an event in time any more than the creation is. The creation, as I have said, is whatever it is that God does that makes it so that history can happen. The eschaton, then, is whatever it is that God does that makes it so that history can happen as God wants it to happen. For us, events come and go. They happen, and then they have happened. But the past is not closed to God. We can do nothing about the events that have happened to us. But the holy, holy, holy

God is happening to those events that have happened to us. And "eye has not seen, ear has not heard" what it will mean when God's happening is fully realized. What St. Paul says of our bodies will true of our stories, as well, I believe. The "flesh and blood" of our experiences will be changed—we don't know how. An experience has a historical glory, a natural glory, that is then resurrected, graced, made new, given an eschatological glory. Our present experiences then are bare seeds. Whether good or bad, sown by us or sown by our enemy. And we cannot now anticipate what they will be when they mature and flourish. We do know, however, that they cannot come to life unless they die.

Thesis #8: God sometimes allows us to continue in sins in order to expose and resist evil and evils in our own and others' lives.

"Sin is behovely." There is no scholarly agreement on what Julian means. She might only mean that sin is necessary part of what God wills to happen in history, a bad character written into a good story. But she might also mean that sin is not only necessary for the story to work for but appropriate for us as creatures, wounded and disoriented and afraid, trying to find our way home, our way to God. This starts to make sense, I believe, if you think about its opposite. There is a kind of self-righteousness that possess some people so that they are so obsessed with not doing anything to violate their conscience that they simply cannot live with others. Instead of compassion and humility and gentleness their lives are marked by judgmentalism and pride and harshness.

Aquinas, commenting on Paul's "thorn in the flesh," suggests something much more radical:

> A wise physician procures and permits a lesser disease to come over a person in order to cure or avoid a greater one. Thus, to cure a spasm he procures a fever. This the Apostle shows was done to him by the physician of souls, our Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ, as the supreme physician of souls, in order to cure greater sins, permits them to fall into lesser, and even mortal sins. But among all the sins the gravest is pride …

Biblical scholars would be quick to argue, I am sure, that Aquinas is not reading Paul correctly. And physicians would be suspicious of his plan to cure a spasm by procuring a fever. But I think the theological point holds, although so much depends on what we mean when we use the word "sin."

I have said God resists evil always, and never does or uses evil or evils. Why, then, would God allow or use *sin*? Is sin not evil? Theologically, what sense does that make? The difference, and it is a crucial one, is that whereas evil is nothings, and evils come from the corruption of nature, sins are the doings of human beings. We sin in speaking and not speaking, listening and not listening, looking and not looking, thinking and not thinking, giving and not giving, receiving and not receiving, showing up and not showing up, and on and on and on. As God is perfecting us, taking time to let our humanity flourish, he might find it useful to use one sin against another. But we can say even more, I think. God uses one sin against another not only in us personally, but in others for us and in us for others. How will the Pharisee ever learn about his self-righteousness if God does not give him a sinful publican to despise?

Thesis #9: God's resistance to evil is experienced by us now always only as futility.

I have said and keep saying that God resists evil absolutely in all of its forms always. But how can that be true? Evil presents itself at every turn. Not only in our lives, but also in cosmic history. Evil is no less present now, on this side of Easter and Pentecost. The church has faced evils, and faced some of them down. But it has done nothing with evil. And it cannot. Only God can end evil, and that will not be a historical event. It will be the event that translates history into the life of God. As long as we are living, our resistance to evil is futile. Without question, we should be striving to resist evils, and we will at times even win in that resistance. The Atlantic slave trade was broken. Arius' Christology was refuted. But the nature of things has not changed. And it has not changed because evil has not been undone. Racial prejudice is as strong as it has ever been. Bad doctrine is rampant (not least in this lecture, some of you are thinking). Should we fight evils? Absolutely. But we should have no illusions about evil and its power. Even our triumph over evils is immediately used against us. So, our efforts are going to fail. And we are going to die and be forgotten. And our civilization, such as it is, is going to die and be forgotten. And our earth is going to die. And then the cosmos. Why? Because, as St Paul says, God has subjected creation to futility.

Jacques Ellul, in the postscript to his Word of God, Word of Man, offers a meditation on this futility:

In spite of God's respect and love for man, in spite of God's extreme humility in entering into man's projects in order that man may finally enter into his own design, in the long run one cannot but be seized by a profound sense of the inutility and vanity of human action…. If we do not pray, if we do not do the works of faith, if we do not seek after wisdom, if we do not preach the gospel, nothing in history, nor very probably in the church, would look much different. The world would go its way, and the kingdom of God would finally come by way of judgment.

Ellul points out that Jesus directed his disciples to call themselves "worthless servants." What are we to make of this? Importantly, he says they are to say this of themselves after they had done everything they had been ordered to do. And he says this to them after they asked him to increase their faith. First, Jesus says that even the meagerest faith is powerful: "you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you." But he then directs them to acknowledge the unprofitability, the inutility, of it all.

Needless to say, calling ourselves worthless servants is not a confession of our personal identity. We are God's beloved. We are Christ's friends. We are the Spirit's home. As St Paul would put it, God would rather not be God at all than to be God without us. Calling ourselves worthless servants is an admission of the ultimate unprofitability of the work we have been given to do—work that God has given us to do. But to say that it is unprofitable is not to say that it is vain. In ways we cannot know imagine, what we are doing now matters. Not in the sense that it can build the kingdom of God or in the sense that it is going to bend the arc of history to justice. History has no arc. And the kingdom of God arrives. It cannot be built. What we are doing now matters in that God will somehow resurrect it—not just give a dead thing more life, but radically transfigure it so it becomes what we could never make it to be.

Paul says the creation was subjected to futility by God so there might be hope for its deliverance into freedom. Because of this futility, we have hope. And having hope means by definition we do not have what we hope for. Nothing we do—and we have to take that "nothing" seriously—can change that. If we could bring the kingdom, even in part, then we would have what we hope for and we would not have hope anymore. Simone Weil says only those who have God dwelling in them can feel God's absence. In the same way, only those in whom God is alive can embrace futility.

Let me be as clear as I can. I am not saying we should not work for change. I am not saying what we do is worthless. We *can* bring change. And no good done is worthless. But even the changes we make will themselves be changed and will lead to new status quo that needs to be changed. Lazarus rises from the dead, but he dies again. It does not mean we should not pray for his resurrection. Of course we should. It does not mean we should not protest bad policies. Of course we should. But it *does* mean that even answered prayers will be unanswered later. Lazarus rises only to die again. And striking down bad policies only helps in the short run. Another bad policy is coming down the pike.

Ettie Hillesum, not long before she died (12 July 1942), reflected in her diary on her utter helplessness:

> But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.

Two years later, another prisoner of the National Socialist state wrote in a now famous/infamous letter: "we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And that is just what we realize—before God… The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us… Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which God is with us and helps us." What possibly could they mean? How can Wesleyans, including Wesleyan Pentecostals, ever accept such ideas?

Everywhere in Scripture we hear prayers for God's help. But does God help us? Of course. The question is, how? God never leaves us to our circumstances, never ignores our prayers. God adores our quirks, blesses us with gifts. But what does that mean in terms of our experience? God's help is known only in faith. It is not experienced, although it happens to us. It is not only in faith because God's help is the help of the one who was, is, and is to come. We will not see it as the grace it is until we see the past, future, and present as one.

There is a sense in which God cannot help us. God cannot be the secret factor in our lives making them what we want them to be, keeping them safer or happier or healthier or smarter or holier. We imply sometimes that the Holy Spirit affords us extraordinary powers unavailable to ordinary humans. Superpowers, essentially. But that's obscene, even blasphemous. The Spirit would not

make us superhuman. Or keep us from normal human lives. Just the opposite in fact, the Spirit can and does help us to be fully human, truly worldly. Not superhuman but *especially* human. And not especially healthily or happily human. Humans, in all of their woundedness, fully alive in their humanity, humans humane through and through. As Bonhoeffer says, God became human so humans might become human.

Finally, we need to know that God *can* not help because he is the God who was, is, and is to come. God does not have to help us in the ways we think we need him to help because the help he can offer is exceedingly better. We are asking for finite helps. He offers the infinite. In this life, then, as we know it now, we can learn to live with God knowing that he is the God who was, is, and is to come, and therefore a God who can not help. We can learn a Spirit-led helplessness, to embrace futility without in any way refusing responsibility to do good or lessening our efforts to obey God. There's powerlessness in the blood. Wonder-working powerlessness.

|5|

I promised a brief "So how now should we live?" conclusion. If evil is what I've said it is, and if God's overcoming of evil works like I've said it does, then what should we be praying for? What should we be teaching and preaching? How should we be involved socio-culturally and politically?

George Steiner tells a story that I find incredibly moving:

> God announces that he's sick of us. Really. "I'm fed up!" In 10 days, the flood. The real one. No Noah this time. That was a mistake. The Holy Father tells the Catholics, "Very well. It's God's will. You will pray. You will forgive each other. You will gather your families and wait for the end." The Protestants say, "You will settle your financial affairs. Your affairs must be completely settled. You will gather your families and you will pray." The rabbi says, "Ten days? But that's more than enough time to learn how to breathe under water!"

Perhaps *that* is what the Christian life is about? Learning to breathe underwater.

John Wesley knew how to breathe underwater. Wesley's famous prayer, "Lord, let me not live to be useless!" comes from his 4 December 1764 journal entry. I did not know until I was preparing for the lecture what the rest of the entry said. Here is how it ends:

> Well might that good man, Bishop Stratford, pray, 'Lord, let me not live to be useless!' And he had his desire: he was struck with a palsy in the evening, praised God all night, and died in the morning."

I had always heard that prayer used to mean "Lord, don't let me be useless in the ministry. Do not let my work by worthless." But obviously that is not what Wesley had in mind at all. It was more like "Lord, kill me before I embarrass myself."

In a famous letter to Charles, written about two years later, Wesley confides:

> In one of my last [letters] I was saying that I do not feel the wrath of God abiding on me; nor can I believe it does. And yet (this is the mystery), I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed, in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen…. And yet, to be so employed of God! And so hedged in that I can neither get forward nor backward! Surely there was never such an instance before, from the beginning of the world! If I ever have had that faith, it would not be so strange. But I never had any other evidence of the eternal or invisible world than I have now; and that is none at all, unless such as faintly shines from reason's glimmering ray. I have no direct witness (I do not say, that I am a child of God, but) of anything invisible or eternal. And yet I dare not preach otherwise than I do, either concerning faith, or love, or justification, or perfection. And yet I find rather an increase than a decrease of zeal for the whole work of God and every part of it. I am borne along, I know not how, that I can't stand still. I want all the world to come to what I do not know.

Here, Wesley sounds most like Julian. She finds she too is borne along: "Our Lord God shewed that a deed shall be done, and Himself shall do it, and I shall do nothing but sin, and my sin shall not hinder His Goodness working." And in this way, Wesley gives us his own "anti-theology." His revelations, like Julian's, contradict the false pieties, the inhumane theologies, we, I, have been a part of sustaining if not building, protecting if not championing. He shows that ministry, faithful ministry, is about being borne along by an energy we cannot claim is our own to help others come to know a God who seems to have abandoned us.